

# **When Parents and Teachers Don't See Eye to Eye**

Presenter: Suzanne Beasterfield

# My path to the issue

- ◉ Secondary English & Japanese teacher facing multiple challenges to class content
- ◉ Teacher educator alarmed at student teachers' dismissive attitudes about parents
- ◉ Grad student curious about unwanted parental involvement

# My attempts to understand

- ◉ Pilot study on teacher discourse around parenting
- ◉ Situation analysis of parent-teacher conflict
- ◉ Review of book challenges in the U.S.
- ◉ Seeking answers in conflict analysis, narrative knowledge, conversations with parents and teachers

# The State of School-Community Interaction

- Most of us believe that the *right* parent involvement leads to successful kids.
- Lots of smart people have developed models of involvement

BUT

- What do we do when involvement is uninvited or contrary to our own values?

# Today's workshop:

- ◉ A framework for thinking about parent interaction (emphasis on disagreements)
- ◉ Strategies that might help (from all of us attending)

# An ounce of prevention

Avoiding the clashes







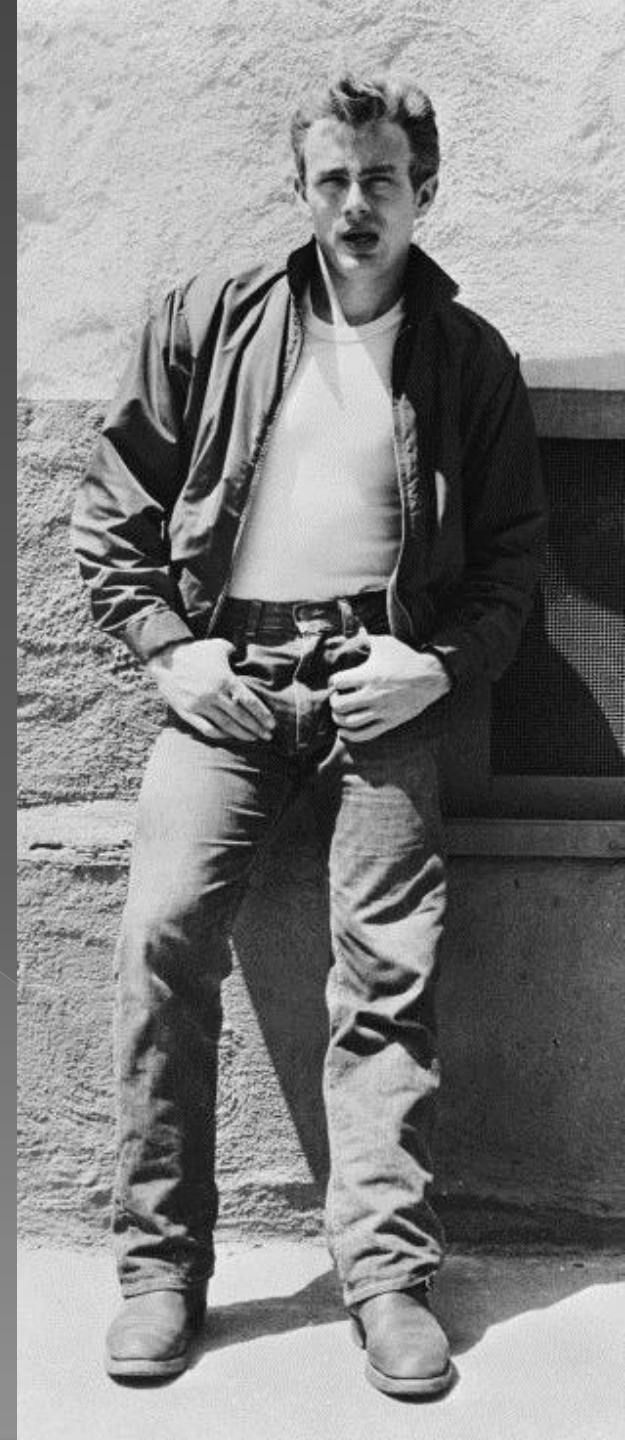


# What are the common characteristics of these stories?

- ◉ Parent attributes or actions
- ◉ School officials' attributes or actions
- ◉ Types of parent concerns
- ◉ Types of resolutions

# What makes parents tick

- ◉ In general:
  - > Rebellion is sexy
  - > Dehumanization = quicker road to conflict
  - > Everyone is the star of his/her own story
- ◉ Possible attitudes toward schools:
  - > It's our fault
  - > Past experience predicts future events



# How schools approach parents

- Our language

- > War words → fortify, attack, do battle, arm ourselves, defenses
- > Sports analogies → score points, end run

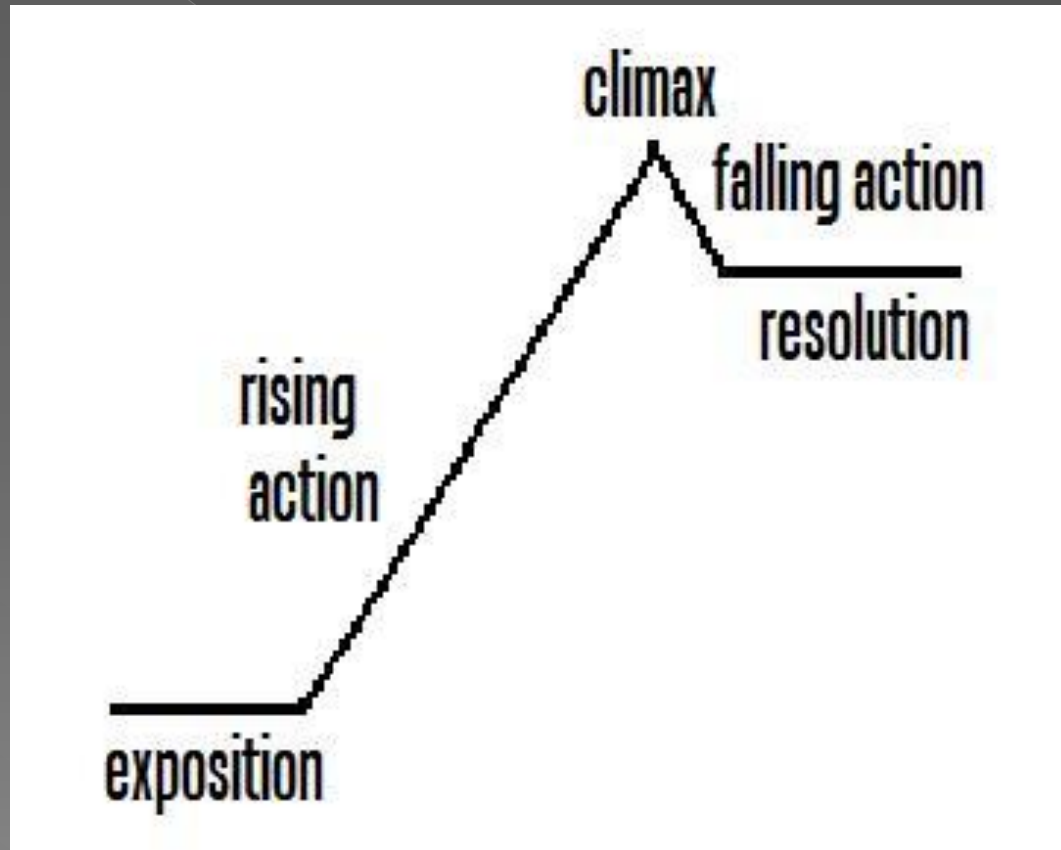
- Understandable defensiveness

- > Public perception
- > Defending content makes kids SOUND secondary
- > Parents are to be “dealt with”

Bottom line: We're on the same side



# Narrative knowledge: I'm the protagonist





# You're the Man







# Cultivating “same side” disposition

- ◉ Build relationships
- ◉ Know your community
- ◉ *Really* actually listen and be open to suggestions
- ◉ Meet as equals
  - > Might even include our dress!
- ◉ Remove fortifications

Remember that once “in group” & “out group” perceptions develop, they are hard to change.

# Parent-side bugaboos

- ◉ Inform but don't issue orders
- ◉ Keep communication brief, focused, relevant, and consistent

Parents in the room: What would you add to this list?

# Unannounced and unexpected

How do we handle the angry parent who shows up out of the blue?

# Theoretical considerations

- ◉ Negotiation factors (Sawyer & Guetzlow):

Antecedent → Concomitant → Consequent

- ◉ Turning points (Druckman):

Events that move the process of negotiation on a trajectory toward or away from agreement

# Power

Goals of the unpowerful are regarded as illegitimate (Clegg)

In schools: Whose influence should prevail?\*

Possible result: “I’m gonna do something to get the power I need to get my way.”

# The situation: Angry parent arrives at school

- ◉ What precipitated this visit?
  - > People might be irritated, but what makes them act?
    - Self-efficacy
    - Impulsivity
    - Perceived role of parent
- ◉ What happens at each point of contact once s/he arrives?
  - > Parking lot, front desk, entering the classroom/office, how they are spoken to

# What NOT to do

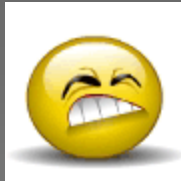
- ◉ Quote school policy
- ◉ Marshal the troops “other teachers do it, too”
- ◉ Create an impasse
- ◉ Insist that you are the same  
 (“I hear you” v. “I know”)

Remember: perceptions of power, meeting as equals, don't give them new steps to climb

**Caveat: Parents who cry wolf**

# What's that leave us with?

- ◉ Listening
- ◉ Re-positioning your position/role
- ◉ Clarifying
- ◉ Buying time
- ◉ Compromise





# Compromise is NOT ideal

Compromise “may generate a functional or material solution but **not resolve emotional or behavioral issues** associated with the disagreement. As a result one or both parties in the dispute may continue to **harbor ill feelings** or other dissatisfaction that can **surface again** if the parties continue to have contact with each other.”\*

Alternative: integrative or collaborative outcome

# More from Conflict Analysis and Resolution\*:

- ◉ Problem solving approaches usually produce better outcomes than settlement orientation
- ◉ Interests usually prevail over ideologies
- ◉ Best conditions for meetings of “adversaries” =
  - > Equal status, common goals, interdependence between parties

Your turn: What do you do when angry parents arrive out of the blue?

In groups of 3-4: Talk through your **advice, experiences,** and **questions**

# I know better than you

The professor/lawyer parent

Taking all the theoretical parts into consideration, what do we do with the parent who seems to be looking down on us?

Remember:

- Parent is the protagonist of his/her own story
- Meeting as equals
- Problem-solving and collaboration v. compromise

# Advice for newbies

Remember those power perceptions:

- ◉ Knowledge: only you and your students know your class
- ◉ Fellow school officials should have your back
- ◉ You're a grown up, too. Don't let anyone play the "age" or "years of experience" card
  - > "That's not relevant to this issue. Let's talk about your child."
  - > Don't take the bait → "What is it you're here to see me about?" [with a smile]
- ◉ Be safe. Running away is okay.



# Repeat “offender” parents

- ◉ Be consistent
  - > Find out what others have said/done
- ◉ Place reasonable limits on communication
  - > Time and place
- ◉ Broken record technique



# On dealing with the fallout

- Analyze the conditions to prepare for the next storm
  - > What precipitated the parent's approach?
  - > What are some points that lead toward and away from positive outcomes?
- Do what you promised
- CYB
  - > Write EVERYTHING down
  - > Have witnesses when you can

# And finally: Keep the faith

“All the darkness in the world cannot extinguish the light of a single candle.”

--Francis of Assisi

It *is* possible to have good parent-school relationships.

It *is* possible to de-escalate situations with antagonistic parents.

But if not: At least you'll have 1-2 good stories.



# Thanks for being here!

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